The C. K. & L. of I. Country Club has turned 50!

Bingo fans around the area, including Missouri, know the C. K. & L. of I. Country Club as a great place to play. The Club provides more than bingo. The hall is rented for weddings and other events. The Swansea Patriots use the hall at no cost for their annual auction. The Patriots have raised $400,000 for Swansea parks. The C. K. & L. of I. with its beautiful surroundings serves the community well.

The Catholic Knights and Ladies of Illinois are a fraternal organization which functions as a life insurance company for its members. C. K. & L. of I. was organized in Carlyle in 1884, and soon after moved to Belleville. As membership grew a meeting place with more room and a recreational facility for its youth would be needed. Emil Wottowa, his son Ed, and Frank Schulte started looking for acreage.

Dr. Walton, physician of Frank Schulte, offered to let them look at an old farm off of Smelting Works Road. It was 36 acres of overgrown brush. Emil Wottowa saw the potential and looked around and smiled. His son, Ed could hear the sounds of cars and wondered where the sound was coming from. After crossing the property they found the source, Route 159.

After purchasing the property, engineers were hired to survey the land and the Environmental Protection Agency was consulted. Wolf Branch Creek ran through the property and would be affected by the proposed lake. Adjacent property owners had to approve the plans. By 1961, the road and lake were completed. Sadly, Emil Wottowa had passed away. This left it to his sons Ed and Jack to continue the dream.

Ed Wottowa succeeded his father as board chairman. It would be another 14 months before the club felt ready to proceed. In 1962, the main structure, a no-frills building was completed. Air conditioning was added the next year. In 1964-65, rear club rooms were added. In 1976, the sign went up and the front entrance was landscaped. Complete interior remodeling was carried out in 1976-77. The club needed sewers and requested annexation into Swansea. A mutual agreement was reached. In 1988-89, the ball diamonds were expanded.

It was a financial blow when bingo was declared illegal in the mid 1960s. Opening the building to wrestling and boxing helped financially. Sam Muchnick and Eddie Gromacki began booking top notch fighters and wrestlers with established records. A few fighters appearing at the C. K. & L. of I. were just beginning their careers, such as Leon Spinks.

But while the fights and rentals were keeping the club afloat, Jack and Ed Wottowa engaged in the battle to legalize bingo in Illinois. Organizations throughout southern Illinois joined together as the IOUCE (Illinois
For six years the organization with its counterparts, the Donkey Sauerkraut Club in the Chicago area and the VFWs in the Springfield area, conducted petition drives to the general assembly, eventually gathering over 500,000 signatures, and did whatever they could to promote legalization of bingo. It was IOUCE which coined the phrase, immortalized on so many bumper stickers, “Keep Grandma Off the Streets - Legalize Bingo.”

Finally, the door was opened for IOUCE to give testimony at a Senate hearing. When Jack Wottowa, and his colleagues, finished their presentation and appeal, they left the hearing room with twenty yea votes and one abstention. The result of their efforts was the Bingo License and Tax Act of 1972, under which all Illinois bingo operators are licensed. C. K. L. of I. has license number B51, designating it as the 51st organization to be licensed.

With bingo now legal, the organization was able to help its financial state and help other charities. The C. K. & L. of I. had a two-day bingo and called over 1,000 games to support St. John’s orphanage.

With 50 years of serving the community, I could go on and on about the fascinating history of the C. K. & L. of I., but I’ve run out of space. I’ll close with saying how lucky we are to have the C. K. & L. of I. in the middle of Swansea. It is close by, has easy access, history, and a wonderful setting. Next time you have the need for catering and rental facilities or feel like playing some bingo think C. K. & L. of I. I hope they’re serving our community for another 50 years.


Submitted by Brian Wells

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